Power at Any Price

Just how much is Doris Anderson prepared to pay?

BY MARGARET DRURY GANE

In the 1940s, Doris McCubbin was one of the few advertising copywriters at Eaton's who never seemed to come close to a nervous breakdown. Usually chosen to take new writers around, she'd slouch along, making the kind of asides that obviously kept her sane: "The manager here is a bitch but it doesn't mean a damn thing," or "Look, you can write this junk up in a couple of minutes, don't waste energy on it." She was a heretic among the hushed employees at the company's downtown Toronto store, which was then noted for an underground passageway smelling of cheap leather and ice-cream waffles.

McCubbin seemed immune to the constant trickle of fear traceable to the glacial management mountain. Pay envelopes warned *Do not discuss your salary with fellow employees*; a brave attempt at unionizing was met with veiled threats. None of this bothered McCubbin . When our copy was rejected, she'd guffaw. "Look, *you* guys take all this so *ser*iously! I never change anything, just stick it in my desk drawer until they've forgotten it, then take it back and they think it's swell. . . ."

There was a lot of Eve Arden about her. Unhurried drawl, pie-in-the-face humor rather than wit, a woman who exposed hypocrisy in others simply by being so un-bought herself. Tall and slender, with a languorous walk, she attracted and was attracted to big handsome men. But typically, her strong romantic streak had nothing of delicate flirtation about it. Like the surprise of a submarine angling snout-first out of the water, she launched her impressions of an overseas vacation with bold abandon: "My gawd," she bawled, stopping a few shoppers in their tracks, "the men of Skye are *gorgeous*!" All her opinions burst forth that way, with no regard for time or place.

What never showed early in her career was single-minded ambition. She swam well but slowly, as if the other end of the pool was just something to bump into. When she went horseback riding, it never entered her mind to race. So when she left Eaton's, "delighted to get out," as she said, none of us realized that within the next decade her lazy, bumptious charm would slowly convert to an intense drive for personal power, and that, on the strength of it, she would become a household name as editor of *Chatelaine*, and a national institution.

Friday, October 13, 1978 — almost 30 years later and just three days before the federal by-elections. The Liberal candidate for Toronto Eglinton, Doris McCubbin Anderson, crawls out of the back seat of a dirty station wagon clutching party literature, short hair blowing around a tired, confused face. "Okay, so what do you want me to do, more streets or what?"

"I think the apartments are more important right now." This from a chilled but confident local volunteer, visibly stoned on the political process. But in the narrow halls, too many people trip over each other dispensing leaflets, hammering on doors. Their line is repeated again and again: "You'll want to meet Doris Anderson, I know — the ex-editor of *Chatelaine* who did so much for women? She's very nice."

"I'm *not* nice!" growls Anderson, stalking toward a captive. But she smiles, transforming her grumpy face splendidly, and tries to inject some spirit into her dried-out voice while helpers further down holler for her to hurry. "There are too damned many people here," she snaps. There are, but nobody hears her.

On election night, she watched the returns quietly at home. As early as 8:15 her opponent, Tory Rob Parker, was the projected winner, and by the end of the evening he had swept Anderson aside by over

11,000 votes. There were few happy-go-lucky cracks then, just surfacing bitterness. In the car on the way to congratulate the winner, Anderson murmured, "It's too bad TV cameras will probably be around or else I'd kick him in the...." A remark made later at the Parker headquarters eloquently points up the dilemma Anderson seems to wrestle with whenever effort expended doesn't yield rewards expected . After Parker introduced his "gracious opponent," she looked around the room: "Well, it's nice to see so many people here whose hands I've shaken."

Maybe there's an explanation of Anderson's somewhat ingenuous approach to politics in a remark she once made on June Callwood's TV show *In Touch*. Callwood asked for her definition of Liberalism. Letting loose her sieved-through-gravel laugh, Anderson didn't hesitate: "Why *power*, of course, at any price." It was, on the face of it, a shocking and thoughtless remark. But to Anderson power had always meant the chance to change things, to get things done. That's why so many of her editorials had emphasized the need for equal rights — and hence more power — for women.

Still, if it was her instinctive definition, then seeing that chance at power clobbered in the by-election would help explain her less-than-gracious action afterward. Somewhere between her days of writing about $39.98 dresses for Eaton's and diving into politics, Anderson had learned that power was important to her. But a one-woman institution had just become a novice again. And that wasn't so easy to laugh off.

Within a few years of going to *Chatelaine* Doris McCubbin became managing editor and married a young lawyer, David Anderson. It took another year and a half to convince Maclean-Hunter Ltd. that she would stick to her career and that she deserved to be editor. She stayed with the demanding job through the births of her three sons, slowly peeling the petit point from the magazine, updating content that had tended to make a new Christmas cake recipe a high in journalism. Over her 20-year rule, circulation rose from 46,000 to more than a million.

The new *Chatelaine*, as Doris never tired of telling people, was carrying the limping *Maclean's* on its highly profitable back. Then Borden Spears became editor of *Maclean's*. Between 1965 and 1969 he did for it what Anderson had done for *Chatelaine*. But after he left, editors came and went like discarded editions, and stories of management interference became public knowledge.

None of this was lost on Doris Anderson. The flush of power brought by her huge success with *Chatelaine* had paled. The chaos at *Maclean's* demanded firm action. Since she badly wanted to be its editor, she went after the job with everything she had.

By now the women's movement had her full support. Her editorials argued forcibly for more women in politics, greater attention by Parliament to women's needs. Her personal horizons had stretched to include tantalizing glimpses of Ottawa's corridors of power. She believed that she deserved *Maclean's*. But the job went to Peter Newman.

Alan Edmonds, host-producer of CTV's *Live It Up*, worked for *Maclean's* at the time and knew Anderson well. "Anyone who knew her professionally understood that she'd make a fine editor. But management was more interested in status, a figurehead. As a woman and *Chatelaine*'s editor, Doris just didn't have the right image."

Other things were going wrong. Anderson's 14-year marriage ended bitterly over disagreements on how to raise children. Plunging into more work and the added demands of being a single parent, she began to show the strain. Ironically, her biggest single contribution to society — helping to change the status of women — was being questioned by less patient younger women. "Everybody knows that her editorials really helped us," says feminist writer Joanne Kates, "but the committed women's movement always knew that it didn't have a viable leader in Doris. Look, everyone close to her knew she was a big-L Liberal. And movements for change don't tend to look for big bourgeois executives to lead them."

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Things weren't going well at Maclean-Hunter either. When the job of publisher of *Chatelaine* became vacant, she asked for it and was refused.

She put in her last two years with the firm collecting honors (the Order of Canada, a doctorate of laws from the University of Alberta) and joining boards. She began her first novel, *Two Women*. Behind the scenes, the three major political parties approached her.

"I'm certain," says Michele Landsberg, an old friend and columnist for the Toronto *Star*, "that Doris would never have entered politics if Maclean-Hunter had given her the rewards she deserved."

Besides, by now the role of being an "institution," with all its private perks and public praise, was becoming a lukewarm substitute for power. And Kates was right; Anderson had begun building up political affiliations several years earlier. In 1968 her husband had worked with Jim Coutts and Keith Davey on Mitchell Sharp's campaign. Her youngest son had been named after Sharp. Although she rapped the Trudeau administration editorially for dragging its feet on women's issues, there may have been truth in the grumblings that her journalistic objectivity was occasionally blurred by her ties to the Liberal party.

With her peculiar style of leashed power, Doris was beginning to broaden her influence. Her parties were beautifully catered, studded with media personalities. Forays to Ottawa to help Canadian publications against tax-exempted *Time* and *Reader's Digest* got her noticed on Parliament Hill. By now she had options opening up that made leaving *Chatelaine* a sound move.

After she resigned, *Two Women* was released and although critics panned it, her name pushed the book onto the bestseller list. Now the Ottawa captains were closing in. Sensing a spring '78 general election, the Liberals worked on her with lunches and phone calls and hints at a cabinet seat if she'd run. "All they were offering me were solidly Conservative, WASP ridings, so I said no." Although that election never happened, autumn by-elections were announced and, by a fluke, a "winnable riding" materialized. Just four weeks before election day, expected Liberal candidate Roland de Corneille, an Anglican priest, declared he would not seek a nomination for the Eglinton by-election because his requests that the date be changed from October 16, a Jewish holy day, had been ignored by Ottawa. Doris Anderson stepped in and got the "safe seat," her old friend Mitchell Sharp's riding.

Putting together some sort of winning campaign in just three weeks was the kind of "short, hard challenge" she liked. If ever power and its possibilities struck, it must have been here, when she was courted by the Liberal machine into believing it was possible to win Eglinton (since rezoned Eglinton-Lawrence), and the political Doris Anderson became fact.

Another cocktail party. For $100 per person, Anderson's supporters can belt back their preferred poison and cushion the impact with chicken, mushroom and cheese canapés. Dessert is an assortment of high-ranking Liberals hauled into town to shore up the troops. Donald Macdonald, looking relaxed away from cabinet pressure, Robert Andras, sad-eyed. "Monique Bégin is here somewhere," a voice laced with awe declares. Anderson allows to Iona Campagnolo, who looks like delectable celery in pale green, that she is "very tired." "This is only the beginning," snaps the unsympathetic minister for fitness and amateur sport, "the really hard work begins *after* you're elected!" Secretary of State John Roberts will drop in. Simma Holt will go door-to-door with Anderson....

Yet the candidate seems slightly insecure. Around her the Ottawa jargon — "parachuting," "big guns," "troops," "attack" — swirls. There's the grim presence of Keith Davey whose narrow eyes set in an unhelmeted quarterback's head continually appraise the crowd. For the first time, Anderson appears to sense her own lack of power in this powerful group. She is the new girl again, having all the decisions made for her.

Hellie Wilson, an aide from the Prime Minister's Office, admitted this problem plagued Anderson right through the campaign. "She had some trouble with not being in control. That, and the business of not knowing who her real friends were, who turned out for her, who didn't."

She's always been described in terms related to the ocean: her sea captain's face (Joanne Kates' apt imagery), a figurehead ploughing through hostile waves. But the leap overboard into cold political waters has taken its toll. Her salty opinions get her into trouble now. Candidates aren't supposed to say that they were running as much against the party leader as they were against the opposition. "Ottawa ticked me off for that," she says. She'll have to control her tongue — and when she manages that, almost all spontaneity and joy may go out of her.

She still hasn't made up her mind about running again, though Ottawa insists she will. "This was great experience for her," Hellie Wilson says. "Next time it would be better to keep her away from the chaos of the campaign office, and organize early. Once candidates see that, they fall into line and obey."

What if Anderson decides to be obedient, if she runs and wins? What can she give if she's elected?

Her honesty and clear eye could be valuable in Ottawa. Her close friend Barbara Frum says she is the right person for politics: "She's patient, willing to work in small steps, to compromise and trade off. And her management skills would make her a super committee person."

What remains to be seen is whether Doris Anderson is willing to trade off her feisty, inbred disdain for phony authority in order to become one of the troops. Whatever her decision, it's likely that her hesitation to run again turns on her realization that Ottawa's corridors of power can, like the old Eaton's, submerge a personality. Bland, thank heaven, is something Doris Anderson can never be.